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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

Well, it's been a whirlwind type of a week, both literally and figuratively. Thunderstorms (and the threat of them) loomed at us all week. And, a lot of family issues (my wife's, this time around) made for a hectic week, that's not over yet. So, as all this is going on, I haven't really had much opportunity to consider editorial topics for this week, much less sit down and write 'em up.

So, while I try to catch my breath and figure out what more I can do to help my wife cope with all that's going on, I'll let you all relax with this week's issue.

Until next time...

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CDLab 0.92 Released

Tuesday, July 10th 2007,

CDLab 0.92 is available.

<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/cdlab/v0.92/CDLAB092.ZIP>
A CD-R burning tool for Atari-compatible computers.

New features since 0.91 version

- Better AIFF implementation.
- New audio formats for audio extraction. (AU/SND, AIFF, AIFF Cubase Audio).
- Filenames mask for audio extraction.
- Interface improvement in Monochrome.

Main features

- Audio track extraction.

- CD-RW blanking function.
- DAO (Disc-At-Once) copy for any single-session discs. (But it doesn't work with my MMC compliant drive)
- Data CD Mode. (TAO (Track-At-Once) multisession mode.)

You need the SCSIDRV interface. (already included in HDDriver)

You can also run this program before CDLab.

<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/scsidrv/SCSIDRV.PRG>

CDLab is now released under terms of the GNU General Public License.

The source code can be retrieved here:

<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/cdlab/v0.92/>

Original Francois GALEA website:

<http://fgalea.free.fr/cdlab/>

Yvan Doyeux

Studio Son 2.093 beta FR & UK

Today, it is not a day of bad luck because there is the new release of Studio Son for your Atari Falcon.

Studio Son 2.093b is available in the wonderful french language:

<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/STD2093F.ZIP>

The english version can be found here:

<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/STD2093E.ZIP>

You can, of course, find the classic 68030 and 68030+68882 versions in these archives.

I have performed a lot of hard tests to check the quality of my algorithms. I have written a lot of different DSP and C programs to obtain correct results. But, it is still a beta version, so be careful with your samples !

This version has been tested with an original Falcon 030 with a 68882 coprocessor. The CT60 card is not officially supported.

Bugs fixed:

- Better WAV, AIFF and AVR formats implementation.
- Space disk remaining bug fixed.

New features and bugs fixed:
(since 2.09b version)

- Rewritten "Apply Effect" function. Studio Son does not need a temporary file any more.
- You can now create with "New Sound File..." blank AIFF, WAV, TRK, SND and AVR files. WAV files created are always 8 bits unsigned and 16 bits signed with little endian format (Intel). Either are always

- big endian format (Motorola).
- You can create you own sample frequency.
- New management of external DSP effects.
- New useful alert boxes added.
- AU/SND files header write error fixed.
- Several loop errors.
- The approximative hi-speed play has been disabled.
- Icons draw bugs.
- Intempestive play.
- DSP effect restore bug after effects changes during a play.
- Reverse stereo with Invert function.
- Block undraw after a Scrub.
- Undo after the "Replace" function.
- Reverse stereo of echo-delay DSP effect.
- Record from cursor.
- Pause with SPACE while recording under Magic.
- Crashes when filtering under Magic fixed.
- For a resample process under Magic, internal file management fixed.
- Significative noise reduction of plopping sounds as long as you use Studio Son.
- Management improved of AIFF files compatible with Cubase Audio. These files are now saved with a physical size rounded to 1024 bytes multiples. Useful to prevent crackling noise when you import your AIFF files with Cubase Audio.
- Buggy "Scrub" function rewritten. No crash occurs.
- Reverse stereo bug for a "Scrub" fixed but still in beta test mode.
- Buggy "Cross Fade" function improved. Autocorrection for wrong parameters. The UNDO is also correct.
- Cut, Copy, Paste, Insert and others have their UNDO bugs fixed.
- Bug of the current working folder fixed. (After an Insert for example)
- DSP effect after a Resample and Filtering is now restored with no problem.
- Overall settings saving are now re-enabled ! Up to date, you MUST keep the STUDIO.SYS folder.
- Rewritten "New Sound File" function. You can now create a file with the fileselector, choose a frequency, ...
- Rewritten "Apply Effect" function. Sample gap subtly fixed. Due to the DSP real time application of this function, it is obvious that it remains a very small gap into your final sample. This gap is usually filled by zero values as it has been thought for this rewritten function. So, it's not recommended to apply an effect to a block selection.
- Markers management bugs fixed. (Delete, saving and loading procedures)
- There was play error with "Preview Cut" function. It's now okay.
- Block selection with SHIFT+TAB to the next marker has been debugged.
- Sample time length is now updated after any UNDO.
- Little bug fixed during a play actived by the space bar with an exported sample from Studio Son.
- Resampling function added (Linear Interpolation).
- Resampling function includes a filter and linear interpolation code in only one DSP program.
- You can resample from 2 Khz to 192 Khz.
- WAV files opening issue fixed.
- Huge undo bug fixed.
- Huge bug of the volume of mono samples filtered fixed.
- FIR filters (Low Pass, High Pass, Band Pass and Band Reject) up to 2048 coefficients.
- Resample process can be followed by a LowPass filter up to 1024 coefficients.
- DSP Filter algorithm improved. The speed of the treatment have been

increased. Now you can enjoy a good optimization of the filtering process.

- The end of the sample is now truly filtered.
- Vu meter clipping problems fixed.
- The cursor running is now correct when sample frequency is not the same as the system frequency.
- Desktop background pattern modified to improve the work in monochrome.
- Redraw bug of the desktop in monochrome corrected.
- Several dialog boxes fields bugs fixed in monochrome.
- Crashes at very high zoom levels fixed.
- You can now really select all the sample with the mouse.
- You can now really place the cursor at the end of the sample with the mouse.
- Wrong size of the blocks at the end of the sample corrected.
- You can now create a block with a "one sample" size when you make a long click on a part of the sample.
- New alert boxes for the Filtering and Resampling function.
- New internal undo for the Resampling function.

New function "Resample..." allows you to change the frequency of your samples with a linear interpolation and an optional Low Pass filter. The "Filtering..." function enables you to carry out FIR filters (Low Pass, High Pass, Band Pass and Band Reject). This is performed by the DSP 56001 and with Direct to Disk process.

Known bugs:

- No sound when playing very high frequency samples.
- Slowly WAV files opening.
- Selected block after a resampling task is not deleted.
- Sample duration and time counter are wrong when the system frequency doesn't match with the sample frequency.
- Unable to reduce physically the size of a sample when you cut blocks.
- In the time counter, the value 99 is followed by 10.
- Several little bugs into the sample window.
- The icon of the function "Generate Low Frequencies" differs with the colour of the resolution.
- Little bugs of sample drawing.
- Random error messages when filter steepness is very low.
- Minor bugs.

Up to date, you MUST keep the STUDIO.SYS folder with Studio Son program file.

If you are using Studio Son on a single TOS, I strongly recommend the launch of ARROWFIX.PRG in the AUTO folder:
<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/arrfix15/>

If you are using NVDI, just run ARROWFIX.PRG after this.
Otherwise, GEM must be copied in RAM with the program GEMRAM.PRG before running ARROWFIX.PRG:
<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/GEMRAM16/>

If you have troubles to run Studio Son under Magic, you can use the patch DSPSLOW1.PRG by Centek included into the package or you can find it here:
<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/DSPSLOW1.PRG>
Don't run DSPSLOW1.PRG if you launch Studio Son under TOS otherwise you might have display or DSP locked issues.

You can also use the nice DSPXBIOS patch by Didier Mequignon:
<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/didierm/files/dspxbios.zip>
<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/dspxbios.zip>

If you use an external clock, run FDI_INIT.PRG into the AUTO folder:
http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/studioson/std2093b/FDI_INIT.PRG

FPATCH2.PRG is now included in the package.

You can also download self-extracting STZIP unpacker:
<http://doyeuxyvan.free.fr/stzip26/STZIP26.TOS>

Have fun !

Yvan Doyeux

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, here in the northeast we've weathered our second heat wave of the season already. They weren't really what I'd call major heat waves, certainly nothing to compare to some of the extreme weather we've seen around the world in the past decade or so... the heatwave that enveloped Europe several years ago, for instance. I've forgotten how many lives that sucker took, but it was not insubstantial. Tsunamis, hurricanes, typhoons, floods, droughts, heatwaves, shrinking polar caps, El Nino, La Nina, shifting ocean currents ... what's next? Locusts? Yeah, I know, I shouldn't even joke about it.

For a change, I'm not going to blame the weather on Global Warming or anything else. It's enough that it IS. It's not really important for me to point a finger. What IS important is that we realize that something's going on and take steps to protect ourselves. That's all I'm saying... that we need to cover our own pink, fleshy butts. If the "breadbasket" of the U.S. turns to desert, will it matter to any of us whether it was caused by man or by nature? I didn't think so.

You have no way of knowing this, but I just wrote (and deleted) three rather large paragraphs dealing with politics and elected (for the most part) officials who feel empowered to lie with impunity in order to further their own ends. Yeah, you can probably guess who I'm talking about. I'm not even going to try being subliminal about it. [grin]

When I went back and read what I'd written, I decided to delete the paragraphs. First of all, because this isn't the place for diatribes about power corrupting (and absolute power corrupting absolutely), but also because I don't have the time to 'do it up' right. When the highest elected official in the land 'pulls strings' to get things done, one can perhaps file it under 'it's a tough job, and sometimes

you've got to get your hands dirty', but lying point blank to the media (and therefore to the electorate)... and making it a half-hearted lie that was so transparent and self-serving that it made Nixon look like a Pollyanna... well, I give up.

What bothers me most is that the media stepped right over this particular lie... and it is a lie... it's not even up for debate... and decided to just ignore it all together.

That brings up an interesting question: Are you derelict in your duties if you fail to report someone derelict in their duties in favor of something 'sexier' to report on? Ummmmmm...

Y E S !

Okay, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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'Ryan' asks about the correct way of shutting down a MegaSTE:

"Hi all. I'm more of a Mac person, coming late to the Atari game. I'm used to needing to tell the computer that I want to turn it off, using e.g. the "Shutdown" menu option on a Mac, and only then turning off the power. I've also used an Atari STf before, which didn't have a hard drive. Now I have a Mega STE with a hard drive. Can I just turn it off when I'm done with it, or do I need to shut it down through software first? I just don't want to damage the hard drive."

Derryck Croker tells Ryan:

"After you've quit any running software you can just turn it off. Different rules apply if you have alternative operating systems such as MagiC etc. In such cases, there will most likely be a Shutdown menu item."

Hallvard Tangeraas adds:

"Yes, and once you've down the "Shutdown" procedure in MagiC etc. you can physically turn off the power with the power switch.

It's funny this subject should come up now because I dusted off my Mega STE a couple of days ago and having finished working with it I stopped up for a second wondering if there was a "shutdown" menu to select or not!"

Hallvard now turns his attention to Ethernet for the MegaSTE:

"Apparently the "comp.sys.atari.st.tech" no longer serves its purpose of being the technical discussion side of the Atari ST, but this newsgroup seems to be THE Atari ST group....

I'd like to add Ethernet to my Mega STE (which will be recased, so its physical location/size etc. doesn't matter).

The current solutions using the cartridge port won't work for me since my cartridge port is already full of MIDI expansion devices daisy-chained together. The NetUSBee for example (<http://hardware.atari.org/netusbee/netus.htm>) doesn't have a "pass thru" port, and I'm worried about data loss or poor performance by joining so many cartridge based devices together.

Then there's the ACSI port (or SCSI through a Link 97) by using a Daynaport SCSI Link (<http://www.anodynesoftware.com/ethernet/main.htm>). I'll be having a Link 97 connected to the ACSI port on the back of my Mega STe, so at first glance this should work fine, but I don't know if the Daynaport devices have SCSI "thru" connectors allowing for multiple SCSI devices to be connected together in a chain (I'll most likely have a SCSI CD-ROM burner connected to the Link 97 inside the new recased computer, and a new SCSI connector on the back of the computer's case for other devices such as an external SCSI hard drive or ZIP drive etc.).

I also don't know how well this works as the Anodyne link above explained that you needed to deactivate the ethernet driver in order to use the floppy drive.

I was hoping for something more "plug and play" and always available, but is this a common issue when it comes to networking an Atari ST?

The final solution is one that I've never heard about but at least in my mind sounds like a great one: using the built-in hard drive interface of the Mega STe!

I've read (<http://atari-ste.anvil-soft.com/html/devdocu6.htm>) that the internal hard drive of the Mega STe actually runs off an ACSI port, which seems to imply that the interface board (where the internal SCSI drive plugs into) is more or less similar to an ICD Link or something.

Having heard about the EthernNE adapter which allows for a standard NE2000 compatible ISA networking card to be used with the Atari ST, which is then to be connected to either the cartridge port (being the EtherNEC version, which isn't of interest for me as explained above), but also as an EtherNEA version which uses the ACSI port, that sounded interesting to me.

I assume the adapter is meant to be connected to the ACSI port on the back of any Atari ST, but if the internal hard drive accesses a second ACSI bus, then I don't see why I couldn't connect it there instead. After all, I won't be using the internal hard drive any longer, which would leave the bus completely alone for the sole purpose of networking! Wouldn't this be a whole lot better than sharing the cartridge or external ACSI ports with other devices in addition to networking?

Unfortunately I haven't had any success in getting in touch with the developers of these adapters (Elmar Hilgart and Thomas Redelberger), and there's not enough information available online to etch your own PCBs.

Here are the sites I've found:

<http://home.arcor.de/thomas.redelberger/prj/atari/etherne/index.htm>
(EtherNEA/EtherNEC adapters)
<http://www.asamnet.de/~hilgarte/> (EtherNEA and Ethernet adapter II)

I'd like to hear from people who know more about the subject and could possibly help me get hold of these devices, or information about building one myself."

David Wade tells Hallvard:

"The DaynaPorts are the nearest thing to "plug and play" I have seen. They have passthrough ports and switchable terminators. You do need HDDRIVER though...."

Hallvard replies to David:

"I already have HDdriver (can't remember which version, but I haven't updated it for years).

Yes, the Daynaport solution is probably the simplest way to go (and I assume those outdated ethernet adapters for the Mac platform are dirt cheap these days), but I'm a little concerned about the limitations mentioned at the Anodyne site about the floppy drive being inaccessible while being online.

Since using an ethernet connection gives that side-effect, does it mean that I possibly can't use an SCSI device (connected through the Daynaport) before I access the STiNG settings and turn off ethernet?

I'm trying to set up a *simple* and efficient system. Not the kind of computer where you have to remember to change a certain setting before doing task A, but if doing task B turn it on, while remembering to disable C and D, but not E... if you catch my drift.

I would guess that a dedicated ethernet card for the VME port would be the best solution, but those cards are near impossible to find these days (and very expensive when they do pop up)."

'Coda' adds:

"I have a PAM's VME ethernet card, which works great in MiNT on my TT, I seem to remember getting it working also in Sting, but I'm not 100% sure. Because I have NetUSBee now which frees up my VME slot for my GFX card, I don't need the PAM's card. Maybe I could sell it if you are interested."

Hallvard tells Coda:

"I'd be interested in hearing more about this card. I've never heard of the PAM card before and searching the web didn't give any useful results.

Does it have an RJ45 connector, and would this solution give a better result and with less complications than the ones where the ACSI interface is used?

I don't run MiNT, only TOS 2.06 and MagiC. Since the computer will become a dedicated MIDI computer I will run it mostly in TOS, so the ethernet card would have to work within TOS.

Once installed in my MegaSTe and with the correct drivers, how would I transfer files from the Atari to my Mac? Will the Mac appear on the TOS desktop as a drive and it's just a matter of drag & drop, or is it a bit more complicated than that?"

Derryck tells Hallvard:

"Take a look at <<http://www.myatari.net/issues/feb2002/samba.htm>>. I haven't read the whole thing, so I'm writing this from the perspective of connecting from the Mac to the MSTe.

Assuming! that that suits your purpose then, in the Mac Finder, go to Go/Connect To Server... and enter "smb://<your MegaSTe's dotted quad address>". You may also need to go to Network Prefs and turn Windows Sharing on.

You can go to Network Utility and give your STe's IP address a name if you want. I can go to my TiVo's web server (at 192.168.1.9) by simply entering "http://tivo" in the address bar. You'll need to look up the specifics on how to do this.

You could also set up an ftp client as Coda suggests, but this is much better if you can get it running (better integration), BUT you will get .ds_store and .trash files piling up on the Atari."

Jason Harmon asks about bringing his 1040 back from the dead:

"I have a later model 1040STFM and a dying MegaFile 60. I guess the old RLL mechanism is nearing its end.

What I'd like to do is remove the guts of the MegaFile, and insert a SCSI host adapter and more modern SCSI drive mechanism (I have a few working 4GB drives) into the MegaFile case. Before I begin this endeavor, I need to locate a SCSI adapter. I've seen a few ICD models, as well as the one from an Atari SH204 available.

Are there any real functional differences between these that would make one preferable to another?

Second, my 1040STFM currently has TOS 1.0 ROMs installed. Although it is a STFM and not an STE, it uses a 2-chip ROM set, and not the 6 chip set like earlier STs. Does this mean I can install TOS 2.06, or am I limited to version 1.4 unless I do motherboard mods?"

Coda tells Jason:

"Yes you are limited to TOS 1.4 unless you do the mod, because TOS 1.6+ resides at a different physical address."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - PS3 Price Cut & New Model!  
    " " " " " " " " " " " " " " " E3 - Re-named, Toned Down!  
                                     Video Games Boring?  
                                     And much more!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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# New PlayStation To Go On Sale In August

Sony Corp. slashed the price of its current PlayStation 3 by \$100, or 16.7 percent, and introduced a high-capacity model in an effort to spur sales of the struggling video game console. Starting Monday, the current 60 gigabyte model will cost \$499, down from \$599.

The Japanese electronics maker also said it is introducing a new version of the PlayStation 3 with a bigger hard drive for storing downloaded content such as video games and high-definition movies.

The new PS3 increases the system's storage capacity to 80 gigabytes from 60 gigabytes and also includes a retail copy of the online racing title "MotorStorm," a company spokesman said. It will be priced at \$599.

The larger capacity machine won't be available in the United States and Canada until August.

It plays into the company's upcoming strategy of eventually offering downloaded high-definition movies, video games, movie trailers and demos, Sony spokesman David Karraker said.

Karraker said further details on high-def movies for download would be released at a later date.

The announcement comes two days before the E3 Media & Business Summit in Santa Monica, Calif., where dozens of industry heavyweights including Sony rivals Microsoft Corp. and Nintendo Co. are expected to show off their latest games and related products.

Sony has said it sold 3.6 million PS3s in the fiscal year ending March 31 and expects to sell another 11 million in the current fiscal year. Microsoft said in its most recent quarterly earnings report filed in April that it had shipped 11 million Xbox 360s.

Nintendo, meanwhile, claims it has sold nearly 6 million Wiis worldwide as of March 31, and more than 40 million Nintendo DS handhelds. The company has predicted it will sell another 14 million Wiis and 22 million

additional DS systems by the end of the current fiscal year.

The Wii and PS3 were released within days of each other late last year. Microsoft had a head start in the current generation of consoles, having launched its Xbox 360 in 2005. Last week, the software company announced an extension of the warranty due to the high number of systems suffering from hardware failure, also called the "red ring of death."

In April, Microsoft began selling a version of its Xbox 360 with a 120-gigabyte hard drive and a souped up high-definition video connection. Called Xbox 360 Elite, the black-colored system sells for \$479.99.

Xbox gamers who already own the \$399.99 20-gigabyte model can buy a snap-on 120-gigabyte hard drive for \$179.99.

Karraker said Sony would use the E3 show to focus on two areas: ways to increase the number of consumers who own PS3s and other products such as the PlayStation Portable handheld system, and expanding the system's library of available games.

He said Sony would be releasing 100 new video games during the current fiscal year, including 15 titles that are exclusive to the PS3 such as the hack-and-slash action title "Heavenly Sword."

#### Video Game Expo Gets Toned Down For '07

The video game industry's annual showcase is saying goodbye to scantily clad booth babes, extravagant multimillion dollar exhibits, blaring lights and pounding music. Celebrity appearances from the likes of Paris Hilton or Snoop Dogg are a thing of the past, too.

This year's version of the Electronic Entertainment Expo, renamed the E3 Media & Business Summit, will be a toned-down affair as organizers hope to have a far less flashy discussion on new and upcoming video games.

The event, which starts Wednesday, looks to be more like a country club getaway, an invitation-only gathering complete with luxury beach-side hotels, sushi restaurants and meetings in private conference rooms.

To put it more diplomatically, "It's about the quality of connection for leaders of the industry," says Michael Gallagher, a former telecommunications policy adviser under the Bush administration who now heads the Entertainment Software Association, the trade group that puts together the show.

After last year's expo, organizers decided it had become too big for its own good. With more than 60,000 people cramming into the Los Angeles Convention Center, there was a feeling that the needs of no one - be it the media, retailers or video game publishers - were being addressed particularly well.

"It had gotten out of control and needed to die," said Mike Wilson, chief executive of Austin, Texas-based game publisher Gamecock. "It was hot, techno was blasting everywhere, there was no place to sit and the microwave cheeseburgers were \$8. It just wasn't pleasant."

Wilson's company wasn't invited to the new E3 that's being held in a

handful of hotels along the beach in Santa Monica, Calif. He isn't the only one.

Only about 30 of the largest video game software and hardware companies are attending, down from the hundreds that packed the event in previous years. Also missing will be the army of small-time bloggers, zealous game fans and others who somehow managed to infiltrate the trade-only event.

As someone who was at the first E3 in 1995 and attended every one since, Dorothy Ferguson said she believes the new format will benefit the 3,000 or so people attending.

"It kind of got away from what was important, which is really the content," said Ferguson, a vice president of sales and marketing for NCSoft Inc. "At the end you felt like a pinball in a pinball machine. It was sensory overload and it was really difficult to hear anything."

This week's event, which runs through Friday, will focus on the industry's largest players, including No. 1 game-software maker Electronic Arts Inc. and console makers Microsoft Corp., Sony Corp. and Nintendo Corp.

The big story last year was Sony's decision to price PlayStation 3 at up to \$600 and whether it would catch on with consumers. Nintendo, meanwhile, promised to bring more non-gamers into the fold with its interactive Wii. Microsoft continued to build on its Xbox Live online gaming platform.

Since then, both the PS3 and the Wii have been unleashed on the marketplace. (Microsoft launched its next-generation console, the Xbox 360, in 2005.)

Analyst Ted Pollack of Jon Peddie Research said he doesn't see any losers in the current crop of consoles and believes they will be a boon for the industry for at least the next five years.

"They're all doing well in their own way," he said. "All three consoles will win battles in the console wars and at the end everyone will be left standing."

And now that all of the hardware has been available for a while, consumers can expect to see a flood of new video games.

Josh Larson, director of the online game review Web site GameSpot, said he is looking for this year's show to shed more light on software that takes advantage of each system's unique capabilities.

He also expects more details on big video game franchises like "Halo 3," "Grand Theft Auto IV" and "Super Smash Bros. Brawl" as well as more information on Sony's strategy to compete online with Microsoft's Xbox Live service.

Other top games could include Konami's "Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots," a "Killzone" sequel from Sony and the latest chapter in the "Final Fantasy" saga from Square-Enix Co.

"It's ultimately about the games," Larson said. "The PS3 box can look real shiny and have lots of powerful specs, but it's ultimately the game experience that causes you to go out and get that gaming system."

In another twist, the ESA is hoping to appeal to the general gaming consumer later this fall. The "E for All 2007," an event that will be open to the public, is scheduled for Oct. 18-21 at E3's former home, the Los Angeles Convention Center.

#### EA CEO Calls Video Games "Boring," Complicated

Most video games are "boring" or too complicated, and game makers need to do more to appeal to casual players, according to the head of the world's largest video game publisher, Electronic Arts Inc.

"We're boring people to death and making games that are harder and harder to play," EA Chief Executive John Riccitiello told the Wall Street Journal in a story posted on its Web site on Sunday.

Riccitiello became CEO at EA in April in his return to the game maker. EA's former chief operating officer had left the company in 2004 to help found Elevation Partners, a media and entertainment buyout firm.

The video game executive criticized the industry for rolling out sequels to new games that add little from the previous version.

"For the most part, the industry has been rinse-and-repeat," he was quoted as saying. "There's been lots of product that looked like last year's product, that looked a lot like the year before."

The comments were made as the \$30 billion video game industry prepares for its annual gathering, the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, in Santa Monica, California. Anticipation is running high that cheaper hardware and a host of keenly awaited new games will fuel the strongest sales in years.

#### Lawsuit Claims Xbox 360s Scratch Discs

Just days after Microsoft took an earnings charge of more than \$1 billion to fix hardware problems in Xbox 360 consoles, a class-action suit says that the consoles also damage game discs.

Filed on Monday in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida, the suit claims that Xbox 360s scratch game discs, making them unusable. Thousands of people have been affected by and have complained to Microsoft about the problem, the suit claims.

While Microsoft hasn't yet evaluated the suit, it says it hasn't heard a significant number of complaints. "Out of the millions of Xbox consoles in use, Microsoft has not received any widespread reports of Xbox 360s scratching discs," said Jack Evans, a Microsoft spokesman, in a statement.

The problem isn't limited to the United States, the suit says. It describes a television program that aired in the Netherlands earlier this year detailing complaints by Xbox 360 users and including results of lab tests that resulted in disc scratching by some of the consoles.

Microsoft offers a worldwide disc replacement program for games that it

authors. A user can send a damaged disc back to Microsoft plus \$20 and receive a replacement. Microsoft also will examine and repair consoles that consumers believe may have scratched discs, the company said.

The suit details the experience of Jorge Brouwer, the plaintiff in the case. He said that his two games stopped working on his new Xbox 360. When he called customer support and mentioned that he noticed scratches on the discs, customer support advised him to buy replacement discs. He also said that customer support wouldn't acknowledge that the console might be to blame.

The suit asks for damages of more than \$5 million and the repair of Xbox 360s that cause the scratching and replacement of damaged discs.

The filing follows an announcement on Thursday that Microsoft would repair or replace Xbox 360s that suffer a certain type of hardware failure. Users have been complaining about the failure, which is indicated by three flashing red lights on the console. Microsoft has not offered details on the type of hardware failure.

The company has yet to record a profit for its Xbox business but said that, despite the \$1 billion charge, it expects to be profitable in 2008. Microsoft sells the consoles at a loss, hoping to earn profit from games sales.

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A-ONE's Headline News  
The Latest in Computer Technology News  
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Crooks Used Botnets, Spam in Stock Scheme

The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission has filed securities fraud charges against two Texas men who allegedly hijacked computers nationwide to send millions of spam e-mails and cheat investors out of more than US \$4.6 million.

The men used networks of compromised computers, often called botnets, to send out spam about at least 13 penny stock companies, the SEC said Monday. The SEC began to investigate the operation after one of its enforcement attorneys received one of the e-mail messages at work.

Darrel Uselton and his uncle, Jack Uselton, both repeat securities law violators, illegally profited during a 20-month scalping scam, the SEC said. The two obtained shares from 13 or more penny stock companies and sold those shares after pumping up the market through manipulative trading, spam e-mail campaigns, direct mailers and Internet-based promotions, the SEC said.

The SEC defines scalping as recommending that other people purchase a security while secretly selling the same stock.

In related actions, the Attorney General's Office for Texas and the Harris County District Attorney's Office indicted the Useltons for engaging in organized criminal activity and money laundering. The Texas authorities have seized more than \$4.2 million from bank accounts controlled by the Useltons, the SEC said.

The SEC's action is "intended to protect investors from fraud artists who would treat the investing public as their personal ATM machines," SEC Chairman Christopher Cox said in a statement. The scheme, by combining get-rich-quick promises, computer intrusions and spam, was a "virulent threat to ordinary investors," he added.

The SEC's complaint, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas in Houston, alleges that the Useltons used an array of computer botnets to anonymously flood the inboxes of American investors with millions of spam e-mails touting near-worthless penny stocks. Each campaign, which featured a single company, lasted from several days to several weeks.



Between May 2005 and December 2006, the Useltons obtained more than \$4.6 million through their fraudulent scheme, the SEC alleged. The Useltons and the companies they controlled typically received unrestricted shares from penny stock companies for little or no money, in return for purported financing or promotional activities, the SEC said.

Darrel Uselton was disciplined by the National Association of Securities Dealers in 2004 and 2005. Jack Uselton was permanently barred from violating the SEC's antifraud provision in a 2002 settled action, the SEC said.

The SEC in March 2007 suspended trading in the securities of three of the companies involved as part of its antispam initiative. The SEC revoked the registration of a fourth company in December 2005.

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#### FBI Ramps Up Spam War

U.S. Internet users should expect a growing number of prosecutions for sending spam and related activities, such as creating botnets, officials with two U.S. law enforcement organizations said Thursday.

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation has 70 active investigations into spam-related crimes, said FBI special agent J. Keith Mularski, speaking at the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's spam summit. The FBI has worked with the National Cyber-Forensics and Training Alliance (NCFTA), a partnership between law enforcement agencies, universities and private businesses, to identify spammers, he said.

The NCFTA, launched in 2002, has identified more than 100 "significant spammers," including five tied to traditional organized crime, Mularski said.

Partnerships with industry are important to fight cybercrime, Mularski said. The Internet Crime Complaint Center, a joint operation of the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center, gets more than 22,000 complaints about cybercrime each month, up from 18,000 complaints a month last year, he said.

"If we don't address it together, it's only going to get worse," he said. "Industry has all the information, because these guys are hitting their

networks."

The U.S. Department of Justice is targeting several spam-related activities, added Mona Sedky Spivack, a trial attorney in the DOJ Criminal Division's Computer Crime and Intellectual Property Section. In June, the DOJ and FBI launched Operation Bot Roast, targeting criminals who use networks of compromised computers, often called botnets, to send spam and launch distributed denial-of-service attacks.

In addition to targeting "bot herders," criminals who control botnets, the DOJ will begin targeting "bot brokers," the people who negotiate the sale of botnet resources, she said. "We're going to start pegging them with some criminal liability," she said. "There is a lot of money getting exchanged here."

Botnets and anonymous proxies are popular with spammers right now because they don't have to use their own computer resources to send the e-mail messages, Spivack said. This makes it more difficult for law enforcement agencies to track down spammers.

The DOJ and other federal agencies are also targeting stock-scheme spam campaigns, she said. In a typical "pump and dump" stock scheme, spammers buy cheap stocks, then send out huge volumes of spam telling recipients that the stock price is poised to rise. The stock price goes up because of the spam campaign, and the spammers sell their stock at a large profit.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission filed securities fraud charges against two Texas men for an alleged pump and dump scheme. The scheme allegedly cost investors US\$4.6 million.

Despite news reports of such schemes, they tend to work, Spivack said. "It appeals to unsophisticated investors who are day traders at home," she said.

The U.S. Congress passed the Controlling the Assault of on-Solicited Pornography and Marketing (CAN-SPAM) Act in 2003, and there's still debate over whether the law has reduced the amount of spam U.S. Internet users receive. CAN-SPAM allows senders to deliver unsolicited commercial e-mail, but requires that they stop when a recipient asks them to. CAN-SPAM also requires that commercial e-mail have accurate header information, have a legitimate postal address for the sender and have a working opt-out mechanism.

The law has given some spammers a set of rules they must follow to become legitimate marketers, said Aaron Kornblum, a senior attorney with Microsoft Corp.

But law breakers have become inventive as law enforcement and private companies find new ways to combat spam, he added. Some spammers rotate the URLs (uniform resource locators) in their spam, making it difficult to track, others don't include URLs at all, he said. Some used pixelated text to defeat spam filters.

"We need our investigative techniques to evolve," he said.

Detailed schematics of a military detainee holding facility in southern Iraq. Geographical surveys and aerial photographs of two military airfields outside Baghdad. Plans for a new fuel farm at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.

The military calls it "need-to-know" information that would pose a direct threat to U.S. troops if it were to fall into the hands of terrorists. It's material so sensitive that officials refused to release the documents when asked.

But it's already out there, posted carelessly to file servers by government agencies and contractors, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

In a survey of servers run by agencies or companies involved with the military and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, The Associated Press found dozens of documents that officials refused to release when asked directly, citing troop security.

Such material goes online all the time, posted most often by mistake. It's not in plain sight, unlike the plans for the new American embassy in Baghdad that appeared recently on the Web site of an architectural firm. But it is almost as easy to find.

And experts said foreign intelligence agencies and terrorists working with al-Qaida likely know where to look.

In one case, the Army Corps of Engineers asked the AP to promptly dispose of several documents found on a contractor's server that detailed a project to expand the fuel infrastructure at Bagram, including a map of the entry point to be used by fuel trucks and the location of pump houses and fuel tanks. The Corps of Engineers then changed its policies for storing material online following the AP's inquiry.

But a week later, the AP downloaded a new document directly from the agency's own server. The 61 pages of photos, graphics and charts map out the security features at Tallil Air Base, a compound outside of Nasiriyah in southeastern Iraq, and depict proposed upgrades to the facility's perimeter fencing.

"That security fence guards our lives," said Lisa Coghlan, a spokeswoman for the Corps of Engineers in Iraq, who is based at Tallil. "Those drawings should not have been released. I hope to God this is the last document that will be released from us."

The Corps of Engineers and its contractor weren't alone:

- \* The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which provides the military with maps and charts, said it plans to review its policies after the AP found several sensitive documents, including aerial surveys of military airfields near Balad and Al Asad, Iraq, on its server.

- \* Benham Companies LLC is securing its site after learning it had inadvertently posted detailed maps of buildings and infrastructure at Fort Sill, Okla. "Now, everything will be protected," said Steve Tompkins, a spokesman for Oklahoma City-based Benham.

- \* Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories, two of the nation's leading nuclear laboratories, closed public access to their

file transfer protocol servers after the AP contacted them about material posted there. Both said the change was unrelated to the AP's inquiry.

The AP has destroyed the documents it downloaded, and all the material cited in this story is no longer available online on the sites surveyed.

The posting of private material on publicly available FTP servers is a familiar problem to security experts hired by companies to secure sites and police the actions of employees who aren't always tech-savvy. They said files that never should appear online are often left unprotected by inexperienced or careless users who don't know better.

A spokeswoman for contractor SRA International Inc., where the AP found a document the Defense Department said could let hackers access military computer networks, said the company wasn't concerned because the unclassified file was on an FTP site that's not indexed by Internet search engines.

"The only way you could find it is by an awful lot of investigation," said SRA spokeswoman Laura Luke.

But on Tuesday, SRA had effectively shut down its FTP server. The only file online was a short statement: "In order to mitigate the risk of SRA or client proprietary information being inadvertently made available to the public, the SRA anonymous ftp server has been shutdown indefinitely. In the coming months, a new secure ftp site will be introduced that will replace the functionality of this site."

Bruce Schneier, chief technology officer of BT Counterpane, a Mountain View, Calif.-based technology security company, said the attitude that material posted on FTP sites is hard to find reflects a misunderstanding of how the Internet works.

"For some, there's sort of this myth that 'if I put something on the Net and don't tell anybody,' that it's hidden," Schneier said. "It's a sloppy user mistake. This is yet another human error that creates a major problem."

File transfer protocol is a relatively old technology that makes files available on the Internet. It remains popular for its simplicity, efficiency and low cost. In fact, several agencies and contractors said the documents found by the AP were posted online so they could be easily shared among colleagues.

Internet users can't scour the sites with a typical search engine, but FTP servers routinely share a similar address as public Web sites. To log on, users often only need to replace "http" and "http://www" in a Web address with "ftp."

Some are secured by password or a firewall, but others are occasionally left open to anyone with an Internet connection to browse and download anonymously. Experts said that when unsophisticated users post sensitive information to the servers, they would not necessarily know it could be downloaded by people outside of their business or agency.

"What they don't realize is that every time you set up any type of server, you have that possibility," said Danny Allan, director of security research for Watchfire, a Waltham, Mass.-based Web security company. "Any files that you are putting on the server you want to monitor on a continuous basis."

Allan said he and others in the security industry have watched for more than a decade as files, including credit card information, sensitive blueprints of government buildings and military intelligence reports, spread through the public domain via unsecured FTP servers.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Central Command, which oversees the war in Iraq, declined to say if material accidentally left on the Internet had led to a physical breach of security.

But among the documents the AP found were aerial photographs and detailed schematics of Camp Bucca, a U.S.-run facility for detainees in Iraq. One of the documents was password-protected, but the password was printed in an unsecure document stored on the same server. They showed where U.S. forces keep prisoners and fuel tanks, as well as the locations of security fences, guard towers and other security measures.

"It gets down to a level of detail that would assist insurgents in trying to free their members from the camp or overpower guards," said Loren Thompson, a military analyst with the Virginia-based Lexington Institute. "When you post ... the map of a high-security facility that houses insurgents, you're basically giving their allies on the outside information useful in freeing them."

The Corps of Engineers expressed a similar concern when it learned that the AP had downloaded the details about the fuel infrastructure upgrade at Bagram from a contractor's FTP site. Spokeswoman Joan Kibler said that kind of information "could put our troops in harm's way."

The AP's discovery led the agency to ask all its contractors to immediately put such material under password protection. In fact, all the agencies and contractors contacted by the AP have either shut down their FTP sites, secured them with a password or pledged to install other safeguards to ensure the documents are no longer accessible.

"We saw that there have been instances where some documents have been placed on FTP sites, and they haven't had any safeguarding mechanisms for them," Kibler said. "We've determined that those documents need to be safeguarded, so we've amended our practices here to require that any of those types of documents have restricted access when they're placed on FTP sites."

Documents found by the AP about Contingency Operating Base Speicher near Tikrit, Iraq, describe potential security vulnerabilities at the facility and paraphrase an Army major expressing concerns about a "great separation between personnel and equipment" as the base prepared for the military's current counterinsurgency push.

"For force-protection reasons and operational security, that's sensitive stuff," said Lt. Col. Michael Donnelly, a military spokesman based at Speicher. "That's for a need-to-know basis. The enemy regularly takes that stuff and pieces it together for their advantage."

The information about Camp Bucca, Bagram Air Base and Contingency Operating Base Speicher was found on the FTP server of CH2M Hill Companies Ltd., an engineering, consulting and construction company based in Englewood, Colo.

"None of the drawings are classified and we believe they were all handled appropriately per the government's direction," said CH2M Hill spokesman

John Corsi. But the company added a password protection to its FTP site after the AP's inquiry and referred the direct request for the documents to the government.

Military officials said they could jeopardize troop security and refused to release them.

Other files found by the AP didn't appear to pose an immediate threat to troop security, but illustrated advanced military technologies. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency posted PowerPoint presentations outlining military GPS systems, including plans to combat GPS jammers. Files from Los Alamos give an early look at a developing technology to combat enemy snipers in urban environments, including one file describing the levels of security behind the new program.

Dean Carver, a counterintelligence officer with the federal Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive, part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said at a recent security conference that such trade secrets, even those dealing with a basic technology, are often a common target for foreign espionage because they can be used to advance a country's own military technology.

"Every military-critical technology is sought by many foreign governments," said Carver, mentioning China and Russia as the leading culprits of snooping on the Internet.

Christopher Freeman believes he may have witnessed such hunting for secrets. While working on an internal security review at his job with the city of Greensboro, N.C., Freeman watched as a computer with an electronic address from Tehran, Iran, accessed the city's FTP server and downloaded a file that contained design drawings for the area's water infrastructure.

He said that while there's no way to know if there was malicious intent behind the download, "when you think of Iran, you think of all the bad stuff first."

"It could have been anyone," Freeman said. "It opened our eyes to show that we're not just little old Greensboro. We're a part of the global community."

That was years ago, and it led Freeman to start looking for FTP sites he thought should be secure. He found a manual describing how to operate a Navy encryption device on the server of the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command. He also found photographs and graphics detailing the inner workings of missiles designed at Sandia.

"It's not something that had any business being on a FTP site," said Sandia spokeswoman Stephanie Holinka of the material Freeman found. The agency has shut down its FTP site while a security upgrade is put in place, she said.

Many sites housed raw data, presentations and documents that didn't have security classifications, while other documents were clearly marked to prevent public release. The manual of the encryption device tells users to "destroy by any method that will prevent disclosure of contents or reconstruction of this document." A warning says exporting the document could result in "severe criminal penalties."

"The military is often criticized for making too many things secret, but when you're enabling an enemy to find out how you use encryption

devices, you easily could be helping them to defeat America," said Thompson, the military analyst.

Freeman, who showed the AP the documents from Sandia and the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command, said he made a conscious effort to avoid information labeled classified but still managed to accidentally download files from Sandia with "top secret" classifications, forcing him to wipe his computer hard drive clean and notify authorities.

Freeman passed along his findings to the FBI and the Department of Defense and later aided investigators in securing the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command site. After getting calls from a contractor and the Army Materiel Command asking about what he found online, Freeman has sought legal representation from Denner Pellegrino, a Boston-based firm that specializes in cyber crime.

"This is a treasure trove for terrorists," Freeman said. "They can just waltz in and browse. I'm by no means a high-tech person. I'm not a programmer. I don't know hacking. I'm just a slightly above-average computer user."

FBI officials declined to specifically discuss Freeman and what he told the agency. But Mark Moss, a Charlotte-based FBI agent who focuses on online security, said foreign intelligence agencies spend a lot of time on the Internet because online intelligence-gathering is cheap, quick and anonymous.

"If they steal your technology through the Internet, it's overseas in an instant," Moss said. "It's the perfect conduit."

#### AOL Promises Refunds

AOL LLC will pay more than US\$3 million to settle complaints that it charged customers for unauthorized services.

The settlement money will go to 48 states and the District of Columbia, which plan to use the money in various ways, typically for consumer education and to fund consumer-fraud investigations.

In addition to the \$3 million, AOL agreed to offer refunds to consumers who complain to the company or through the offices of states' attorneys general. AOL must refund consumers who complain of unauthorized charges for services, the states say.

AOL also agreed to improve the way that customers can cancel their services. Previously, most customers could only cancel their service by calling AOL. But AOL customer service representatives received incentives for retaining customers. As a result, many customers complained that it was very difficult and in some cases impossible to cancel their service, according to the Arkansas attorney general's office.

In Illinois, customers who tried to cancel their services were often offered a free month of service as an incentive to stick with AOL, said that state's attorney general office. After the free month, customers would try again to cancel but customer care representatives would pressure them to stay. Some consumers said that they thought they'd cancelled their service only to continue receiving bills for the service.

To address the problem, AOL setup an Internet site that customers can use to cancel their service. In addition, when customers cancel, AOL must clearly disclose the amount of time remaining on the account and provide a confirmation number showing that the customer cancelled the service.

AOL made many of the changes during 2005 and 2006 on a voluntary basis nationwide, said AOL spokeswoman Amy Call. The settlement "puts to rest any remaining issues related to our old access business model," she said in a statement.

Many customers may have recently begun trying to cancel their service because AOL is in the midst of a business transition. It now offers free e-mail services and grants anyone access to its portal, in hopes of earning revenue from advertisements. AOL still offers dial-up Internet access and a tech support service for a fee.

#### Sites Let Preteens Network Online

This past spring, 10-year-old Adam Young joined other tweens on Club Penguin, playing games, throwing virtual snowballs and chatting with fellow kids who appear onscreen as plump cartoon penguins. A few weeks later, Adam asked Mom to pay \$5 a month for extra features, such as decorating his online persona's igloo.

Karen Young demanded to learn more about what some have billed as "training wheels" for the next MySpace generation. She spent time on the site with Adam and consulted with her sister, the mother of another daily visitor.

"I said, 'Well, what is it? What does it involve?'" Young recalled. "I wanted him to show me what he wanted and what it was about."

Drawing preteens as young as 6 or 7, sites like Club Penguin and Webkinz are forcing parents to decide at what age they are willing to let their children roam about and interact with friends online. They, along with schools, are having to teach earlier lessons on safety, etiquette and balance with offline activities.

"It's kind of like what happened in the real world with Cabbage Patch dolls and Beanie Babies," said Monique Nelson, executive vice president of Web Wise Kids, a nonprofit focused on Internet safety for children. "Their friends are doing it, so like kids who follow like sheep, they go online and go on these sites."

According to comScore Media Metrix, U.S. visitors to Club Penguin early tripled over the past year, while Webkinz' grew 13 times.

Peggy Meszaros, a professor of human development at Virginia Tech, said kids' identities begin to blossom by 8 and they start wanting to meet other children, so these sites may become their introduction to social networking. But she said kids that age would get much more "going to the swimming pool and meeting friends face to face," making parental oversight of online usage ever-important.

Young, a first-grade teacher in Louisville, Ky., ultimately deemed the environment relatively safe and agreed to pay for a membership. Unlike



News Corp.'s MySpace, the anything-goes site frequented by Young's older son, Club Penguin limits what kids can say to one another, reducing the risks of predators and online bullying.

That sentiment was echoed by Tony Bayliss, father of 7-year-old Maisie in England. Club Penguin is the only site Bayliss lets Maisie visit unsupervised; Bayliss also has a cartoon penguin of his own and visits his daughter online while traveling.

"It's what the future is," Bayliss said of the online environment. "It's what she's going to be using for the rest of her life."

Club Penguin was started more than a year ago as "an online playground for kids," said Lane Merrifield, the site's co-founder and chief executive. "How can we take the fun pieces of these more grown-up and adult (social-networking) sites and surround them in a safe environment?"

Kids win gold coins by playing games such as sled racing and, with a paid membership, buy virtual items like furniture and clothing. Kids can attend parties and make friends by adding other penguins to their buddy lists.

The site, from Canada's New Horizon Interactive Ltd., does not try to keep out older users - after all, anyone can lie about age. Rather, it builds in controls meant to curb outside contact and harassment. The company says it has never had a problem with predators.

Parents can choose an "ultimate safe" mode, meaning chat messages sent and received are limited to prewritten phrases, such as "How are you today?"

In the standard mode, kids can type messages like any other chat program, but only the sender sees messages containing foul language and even innocent-sounding words such as "mom" - to prevent someone from asking, "Is your mom home?" Senders would think they are being ignored and not try tricks to bypass filters.

The filters also catch numbers that might form a phone number a kid is trying to share, even if someone tries to replace "1" with "one."

Veterans can apply to become "secret agents," responsible for patrolling the site and reporting bad behavior, and violations can get a kid banned for a day or longer.

Likewise, Webkinz limits chats by permitting only prewritten phrases, and e-cards go only to those already on friends lists.

Kids take quizzes or perform chores to earn "KinzCash" to buy furniture for their virtual room and food for their virtual pet. They must return to the site regularly to keep their pets fed and healthy; otherwise, it's a trip to Dr. Quack for medical care, though the pets themselves never die.

Unlike Club Penguin, though, access to the Canadian-based site from Ganz is restricted to those who buy a Webkinz plush toy at a retail store for about \$15, many of which have been selling out because of high demand. Think Beanie Babies with an online component. A code on each toy unlocks the site for a year.

Both sites do require some reading skills, though younger kids can participate with older siblings or parents.

Other popular tween online hangouts include Millsberry, a General Mills Inc. site that promotes good eating but features product placements for its cereals, and Numedea Inc.'s Whyville, where tweens play games and earn clams.

Although these social-networking precursors for tweens tend to incorporate more safety measures than MySpace, Facebook and other sites geared toward teenagers and adults, experts warn that parents can't simply sign their kids on and leave them there, especially during the summer months when kids have more time to spend online.

"We want them to develop and grow physically, spiritually and emotionally," Meszaros said. "If they are on the computer three or four hours a day, that's time they could be doing other things. Parents need to be monitoring."

Step one is to decide whether kids should be there at all.

Jane Healy, author of "Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds - for Better and Worse," said kids may feel they are "going to be a hopeless social failure" if they can't participate.

Advocates say the controlled environment can teach kids important lessons about typing, communicating, caring for pets and budgeting - they must learn to work and save for the trampoline they want for their virtual room.

But Healy said these sites also teach kids to be "a good consuming member of the consuming culture (and) to need stuff to be considered successful or good."

She urges caution in opening the door to "powerful forces out there trying to intrude into your family life and personal relations with your child." Not only do these sites introduce commercialism, she said, but they also can take kids away from offline environments where they can learn to pick up body language and facial expressions.

Software tools are available to help parents control Internet activities, including use of these sites. Monitoring software can record a kid's chat conversations and whereabouts - secretly if the parent wishes. Other tools, some available for free, aim to block porn or limit when or how long a child can be online.

Parents should at least keep computers in an open room and surf the Web side-by-side with their kids now and then. A discussion on time limits is important because rules are far easier to impose from the beginning, and Club Penguin will soon introduce a feature for parents to set such limits on the site.

"As soon as the egg timer comes up, we're going to have a list of activities they can do outside," Merrifield said.

Parents should also start addressing safety and online etiquette.

"They can't be there every time they go online .... so it's even more important to spend more time up front teaching them how to be safe and smart," said Susan Sachs, chief operating officer with the nonprofit Common Sense Media.

It helps that many parents are now using the Internet not just for work

but also for recreation, information sharing and other social interaction.

"When kids start to use technology, (parents) can be much more part of the process, as opposed to, 'Gee, this is all new and strange to me. I don't want you using it,'" said Peter Grunwald, a researcher who specializes in kids and technology.

Nonetheless, Grunwald said, "kids are using online services at an earlier age, and that means parents do have to exercise their role as parents and be mindful of it at an earlier age than, say, seven, eight or nine years ago."

### Webkinz Site Not Just For Kids

For about a week my 6-year-old son, Mark, was having a grand old time on Webkinz, one of several children's Web sites that have exploded in popularity in the last year or so.

Then it dawned on him. His online pet, a gorilla named Ben, was playing games like "Rock Paper Scissors" and "Go Fish" against the other denizens of Webkinz World, nearly all of whom were pink kittens or fluffy-maned horses.

"Is PoniesRock!24 a girl?" he asked.

"What difference does it make?" my wife and I responded.

"Yeah, but is PoniesRock!24 a girl?"

We finally conceded: "Probably, yes."

Click.

He quickly reconciled his little internal conflict and was soon happily back on track. And that was fine with us. Webkinz is one of the few sites that has captured our son's attention without aggressive promotional tie-ins for superhero movies or television shows. He doesn't need a lot of parental help to navigate the site.

And Webkinz has broad appeal.

While it seems that the sweet spot in the Webkinz demographic - what with the cutesy-pie graphics and the proliferation of fluffy felines in pastels - is probably the preteen girl, the site has something for everybody. When we boot Mark off the computer to go play outside, either my wife or I will often play a few games before we shut it down.

To log on to Webkinz, you first have to buy a specially designated stuffed animal for about \$15 or so. (The toys themselves appear a little cheaply made, like what you'd find at a roadside carnival. My wife has already had to stitch Ben up twice.)

The price compares favorably to another popular site, Club Penguin, which charges about \$60 a year for full access, though limited features are available for free.

The toy comes with a code giving you one year's access to the Webkinz

World site at [webkinz.com](http://webkinz.com). There your toy gorilla or cat or frog or bunny becomes a virtual pet, and it's your job to keep it happy, healthy and well-fed.

You do this by "buying" food, toys and amenities with Webkinz cash, which you earn by playing the games and fulfilling various tasks.

Or just buy another stuffed animal - you get 2,500 or more in KinzCash for every subsequent toy you purchase, compared with 3 to 50 by playing games. That is assuredly part of the reason many people seem to collect dozens of WebKinz toys.

The huge variety of games and activities is by far the site's best feature. Some are habit-forming and addictive, including math, word and shape puzzles in the vein of "Tetris" or sudoku. Most reward critical thinking in some fashion or another.

Some games appeal to the very young - my 3-year-old laughed uncontrollably at one game where you whack a puffball-type creature with a club - and others appeal to adults and teens. I suspect many players are adults, either using their children's accounts like we do or childless adults who have moved on from their Beanie Baby collections.

The games can be played solo or two-player, and the Web site will usually find you a challenger in seconds. You can see the site's appeal to adults late at night, when the arcade is still hopping and the level of competition on those word puzzle games rises dramatically.

Some of the games seem complicated even for older kids. A dice game that is apparently popular was a little confounding. Mark needs help playing some games, but can do others by himself. The variety is sufficient to please everybody.

The lack of advertising on the site is also welcome. The Web site provides rewards and incentives for buying additional toys but does not seem particularly aggressive in pushing kids to spend real money. Some features, like tending to a garden, reward players who log on to the site every day. My wife says it promotes responsibility, though I find it mildly obnoxious to insist on my child's daily participation.

The ability to outfit your pet's living quarters is also staggering. Thousands of virtual items are available for purchase, from custom towel racks for the bathroom, swimming pools for the backyard and designer clothes for your pet to wear.

The virtual shopping mimics real online shopping, with "add to cart" icons. Some may see it as indoctrination into real online shopping, but we were actually pleased because my son is learning to save money, forgoing smaller items to buy the big stuff.

And it provides an interesting window into what kids find appealing. I was a little surprised he spent so much time selecting particular types of furniture.

The Web site limits the ability to chat and interact with other users to a series of prefab questions and statements - "What's Up?" "I'm feeling tired." "Do you want to play in the arcade?" and so on. That makes it impossible for skeezy perverts to prey on children.

Unfortunately those limitations - while necessary - also make it difficult

to have any substantive interaction. Playing a live opponent really feels no different from playing a computer. What's the fun of winning "Rock Paper Scissors" if you can't trash-talk your opponent after your rock whumps all over his scissors?

The interactions with your virtual pet are also a little stilted, and like politicians, the virtual pets have a tendency to pander to their audience.

"Do you want something to eat?" Mark asked his gorilla.

"You take good care of me," the gorilla responded.

"How are you doing?" Mark asked.

"I'm glad I'm your pet," he responded as a little heart burped out from the gorilla.

The graphics are cute and simple, and the site itself usually seems to work well. At times on a recent weekend, though, the entire Web site was shut down for maintenance. We also previously faced glitches running some games on a Safari browser on a somewhat-dated Macintosh; those problems cleared up after switching to the Firefox browser.

The Web site is operated by the Ganz company, a third-generation family business outside Toronto that had been primarily known for manufacturing plush toys and collectibles. Spokeswoman Susan McVeigh would not discuss the number of registered users or which features on the site are most popular.

She did say that the site began in 2005 but really took off late last year. Many stores have been selling out of the toys.

And she said more boys inhabit Webkinz than people realize.

Ben the gorilla will be glad to hear it.

### Web Warnings May Not Make Kids Safe

Almost every lesson on Internet safety warns against posting personal information such as phone numbers and school names. Researchers are now suggesting, though, that such advice, however well-intentioned, doesn't necessarily make children safer from predators and related threats.

In a recent study published in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, researchers found no evidence that sharing personal information increases the chances of online victimization, such as unwanted sexual solicitation and harassment.

Rather, victimization is more likely to result from other online behavior, such as talking about sex with people met online and intentionally embarrassing someone else on the Internet.

"For a long time, we really didn't know," said Michele Ybarra, one of the study's authors. "It made sense if you post or send information you increase your risk. It's also a very easy message: Don't post personal information and you'll be safe."

But Ybarra, who is president of the nonprofit Internet Solutions for Kids, warned that parents and educators must now reassess the lessons, saying resources may be wasted on tips that do not address the underlying problem.

Instead of discouraging children from communicating, she said, the better approach is to teach them about what at-risk behaviors to avoid and warning signs to spot.

"We now need to be a lot more specific and accurate in our message," she said.

The research, published in February, was based on telephone surveys of 1,500 Internet users ages 10 to 17.

In a separate study of 2,574 law-enforcement agencies, researchers found that online sex crimes rarely involve offenders lying about their ages or sexual motives. The 2004 study, published in Journal of Adolescent Health, said offenders generally aren't strangers, and pedophiles aren't luring unsuspecting children by pretending to be a peer.

"Most of these sexual-victimization (cases) happen at the hands of people they know, and a lot happen at the hands of peers," said Janis Wolak, co-author of both studies and a researcher with the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center.

The research also found that online victims tend to be teens with troubles offline, such as poor relationships with parents, loneliness and depression.

"A lot of parents, I think, can breathe a big sigh of relief," said Anne Collier, editor of the online newsletter Net Family News. "If their kids are just socializing with their friends online, they are going to be fine."

Nancy Willard, author of "Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens," said predators don't need to be snatching kids by piecing together clues from personal information when they can go for the low-hanging fruit - the teens specifically engaging in at-risk behavior, such as posting sexually provocative images in their profiles.

Many Internet-safety experts remain skeptical that parents and educators can let their guard down on the posting of personal information at sites like Facebook and News Corp.'s MySpace.

"The only way they can get into trouble is if they end up meeting the stranger, and that's going to come from giving out personal information," said Susan Sachs, chief operating officer with the nonprofit Common Sense Media. "It's pretty clear to connect the dots between personal information and predators."

Monique Nelson, executive vice president of the Internet safety group Web Wise Kids, said kids "don't have the sense of ... knowing when a predator would be grooming them" so a blanket message against posting personal information is a good first line of defense.

Amanda Lenhart, a senior research specialist at the Pew Internet and American Life Project, agrees that the attention on personal information may be misplaced, but she said caution may still be wise.

"There is something to be said for preserving your privacy for other reasons," Lenhart said, noting that too much information could come to haunt teens when they apply for college or jobs. "Safety is not necessarily the No. 1 reason."

### Net Radio Gets Last-Minute Reprieve

The sand in the Internet radio hourglass was rushing to the bottom as a Sunday deadline that would see new fees imposed on Internet broadcasters approached. But a last-minute reprieve has webcasters rejoicing, at least temporarily.

It's been a roller coaster ride for webcasters in the past weeks, as Internet radio faces a royalty rate increases of more than 20 percent a year for the next three years. On Thursday, Internet radio lost its appeal to the federal D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, which refused to halt the rate increase.

Despite the court ruling, however, a deal was inked late Thursday that temporarily waives the minimum charge of \$6,000 per channel that the Copyright Royalty Board (CRB) required. But webcasters aren't in the clear just yet, for if negotiations fail, the old story line of doom and gloom for webcasters will continue.

"During negotiations, SoundExchange committed temporarily not to enforce the new royalty rates so webcasters can stay online as new rates are agreed upon," the SaveNetRadio Coalition reported on its Web site. SoundExchange, the company that collects royalties on behalf of music labels, did not return calls seeking comment.

SaveNetRadio gave part of the credit to the millions of people who contacted Congress in support of Internet radio. The support came in the wake of a unique protest in June, when webcasters silenced their broadcasts for one day to demonstrate what the Web would sound like without them.

Yahoo, Live365, Rhapsody, MTV Online, AccuRadio, Radioio, Born Again Radio, Pearadio.com, Ear.fm, and scores of others participated in the national "Day of Silence" on June 26. Notably, AOL Radio did not participate.

SoundExchange proposed a \$2,500 cap on the fees charged against royalties for recordings played on Internet Radio. Recently enacted regulations due to go into effect on July 15 require webcasting services to pay a \$500 minimum fee "per station or channel," regardless of the overall number of stations or channels they stream. The new offer was SoundExchange's attempt to address webcasters' concerns about their liability for per-channel minimums.

Jonathan Potter, executive director of the Digital Media Association (DiMA), said his members would agree to a \$2,500 per-service cap for the entire term of the copyright royalty ruling through 2010, but not the partial offer presented to DiMA in writing, which would terminate in 2008. Any offer that doesn't cover the full term is simply a stay of execution for Internet radio, he argued.

Now, both sides of the table are talking again. Gartner analyst Mike

McGuire, for one, said he is glad to see the negotiations continue: "We are seeing an acknowledgment on SoundExchange's part that it's better to negotiate now than risk killing off a potentially brand new revenue stream."

Meanwhile, late Thursday, Nydia Velasquez, Chair of the House Small Business Committee, and Ranking Republican Steve Chabot introduced H.R. 3015, a bill to delay the effective date of the CRB's Internet radio royalty rate decision by 60 days, until September 13, 2007.

"We are hopeful that this support and that of other members of Congress will help resolve the current rate dispute, as well as the long-term problem of royalty standard parity," Potter said.

#### Site Chosen To Host Simpsons Premiere

Welcome home to Springfield, Vermont, Homer and Marge Simpson. The Vermont town on Tuesday beat 13 other Springfields from around the United States in an online vote for the right to host the premiere of the upcoming Simpsons movie featuring the popular television cartoon family.

The New England town, with a population of about 9,500, won with a video showing a Homer Simpson look-alike chasing a giant, pink doughnut through the town. It also boasted similarities to the cartoon Springfield, such as having a nuclear power plant nearby.

"After 18 years, it's good to finally welcome the Simpsons home. Vermonters love The Simpsons," Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont said in a statement.

"Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie will look great on that yellow carpet with the green mountains as a backdrop."

The Vermont town beat Springfields in Oregon, Colorado, Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Florida and Louisiana in the video contest to best portray the "Simpsons' spirit."

It landed 15,367 votes of 109,582 votes cast. Springfield, Illinois, coming in second with 14,634 votes and Springfield, Oregon, ranked third at 13,894.

Springfield, Florida, came last with 1,386 votes.

The creator of the TV series, Matt Groening, located Homer, Marge and their children Bart, Lisa and baby Maggie in the fictional town of Springfield after noting that this was one of the most common U.S. town names.

Some already had a claim to fame, such as Springfield, Illinois, which was home to Abraham Lincoln, and Springfield, Massachusetts, known as the birthplace of basketball.

But in the TV series' 18-year history it has never been clear which of the 34 Springfields in the United States was the basis for the version in the cartoon, a satirical parody of Middle American lifestyle.



The contest between the Springfields sparked friendly rivalry, with some pulling in top-name endorsements to try to win such as Democratic Sen. Edward Kennedy for his home state of Massachusetts and skateboarder Tony Hawks for the Oregon bid.

The premier of "The Simpsons Movie," being released by News Corp.'s 20th Century Fox, will be held on July 21 in Vermont with the filmmakers on hand to walk the yellow carpet.

But the other 13 Springfields will also be given small screenings on July 26, the night before the movie hits theaters nationwide.

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